Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

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Our Little Secrets

AHOY THERE 005!

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

Away we go, dipping our oars into the stormy waters of 2005, no voyage for faint hearts. But, as always, the good ship CounterPunch is freighted to the bulwarks with optimism, Dr Pangloss beaming in the bows, telescope akimbo.

Consider, soon the dark clouds may roll away and we'll find the nation's affairs being guided by Dennis Hastert, speaker of the House of Representatives, or by Ted Stevens of Alaska, the current president pro tem of the US Senate and, as such, fourth in line to succeed W. Bush, as designated by Title 3, Chapter 1, Section 19 of the United States Code also known as the Presidential Succession Act. Stevens, senior congressional representative of the arms industry and notoriously choleric, is one ahead of Condoleezza Rice, two ahead of John Snow, and three ahead of the Don di tutti Donderheads, Rumsfeld.

We are not dabbling in hypotheticals here. I draw your attention to a riveting report by C.L.Hallmark, run just before Christmas by Indymedia, Houston. (houston.indymedia.org).

With file photos Hallmark demonstrates, convincingly in my view, that George W. Bush "is wearing a medical device for 'persons at risk of cardiac arrest.' It is a Life Vest wearable defibrillator. He started using it sometime after his January 2002 fainting spell, which was attributed to choking." This was the notorious pretzel incident, when said pretzel lodged in Bush's throat, thus stimulating the vagus nerve to send a signal to his heart, slowing it down and reducing blood flow so much

(**OLS** *continued on page 2)*

Occupation on Borrowed Time

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

Baghdad.

A month before the Iraqi election and Iraqi officials still claim they have the resistance on the run and life for ordinary Iraqis is slowly getting better. Neither point is true. A better guide to the state of government morale is ministers' enthusiasm for foreign travel.

In the Iraqi press it is a standing joke that at any one time half the government is representing Iraq abroad. From the safety of Washington, London, Moscow, Geneva or Dubai ministers speak optimistically about Iraq turning the corner after the poll on January 30. On the rare occasions that they return to Baghdad they lurk in the Green Zone protected by bodyguards from western security companies.

Before Christmas I went to the Iraqi Airways office in the lobby of the Palestine Hotel to buy a ticket for the flight from Baghdad to Amman. It is the safest way out of the country because resistance fighters and bandits largely control the road across the desert to Jordan. I had to wait for my ticket because the man behind the counter was busy on the phone. I could hear him patiently explaining to some official at the Ministry of Planning that their minister could not have a first class ticket on the plane the next day because, unfortunately, the cabin was already full up with the Minister of Oil and his entourage. "We should be called ministerial airways", he said impatiently as he put down the phone.

Life in Baghdad is probably more miserable now than at any time since looters were rampaging through the streets in the weeks after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Then at least there was hope that conditions would get better. But in the last three months they have got visibly worse.

Not far from where I live in the heavily defended al-Hamra Hotel in the Jadriyah district of south Baghdad there is a permanent line two miles long of cars and pick-ups waiting to get fuel at a gas station. Sometimes drivers sleep in their cars two nights in a row before they reach the head of the line which stretches over a bridge across the Tigris into Dohra, a tough largely Sunni Muslim district where the resistance periodically puts up its own roadblocks and takes control. The waiting cars gingerly skirt a crater in the middle of the bridge where a month ago the resistance tried to blow up a police patrol. It is not a very big hole but nobody has tried to fill it in.

The drivers on the bridge agree that the election is probably important but they speak of it as if it has limited relevance to their own lives. It is very cold at the moment in Baghdad and at night it is freezing. At best the electricity is on for two hours and then off for four. People try to heat their houses with kerosene heaters but kerosene is expensive and in short supply. A few months ago the most common sound in Baghdad was not gunfire, though this was frequent enough, but the put-put of $100 generators. They produce enough electricity to power the lights and television but now they are falling silent because of the gas shortage.

The world outside Iraq focuses on the dramatic events like the US Marines' assault on Fallujah in November or the election at the end of this month. But Iraqi families are too absorbed in the daily struggle to survive to think about much else. Outside the schools in Baghdad every afternoon there are crowds of parents picking up their children because they are terrified that they will be kidnapped. The kidnapping of foreigners is heavily publicized but 99 per cent of kidnap victims are

(**Iraq** *continued on page 6)*

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(**OLS** *continued from page 1*)

he passed out, according to White House physician Col. Richard J. Tubb, M.D.

"Based on photos showing him wearing the device", Hallmark goes on, "one can conclude the fainting was due to atrial fibrillation, which his father also had. His father's AF was caused by Graves' hyperthyroidism, which Barbara Bush also has. Bush Jr likely has AF and, less likely, Graves', based on his family history and symptoms. The AF may have caused a stroke or TIA (mini-stroke), of which physicians watching the debates detected symptoms. Observers have noted psychological symptoms consistent with this and with Wernicke-Korsakoff disease. . ."

When the monitor detects a life-threatening heart arrhythmia, it sends a signal to a small module on Bush's belt which can activate a sequence whereby the defibrillator connected to the monitor sends an electrical pulse to the large "shocking electrode" on Bush's back between his shoulder blades (visible in outline in photos of the president in the second and third debates, and thought by some to be a W/T interface with Karl Rove) and a smaller one on the chest. The pulse can be repeated until the heart starts pumping blood effectively, up to five pulses.

Hallmark explains that "in the January 2002 pretzel-choking episode, according to President Bush, the period of unconsciousness was brief – a few seconds. When fainting begins and ends suddenly, the cause of fainting usually is not what his doctors reported (vaso-vagal syncope) but instead is an abnormal heart rhythm such as atrial fibrillation (AF). Chronic AF is consistent with Mr. Bush's requirement for constant monitoring and immediate access to defibrillation. Atrial fibrillation can lead to disastrous consequences if the patient is capable of sustaining a very rapid preexcited ventricular response with conduction over the accessory pathway. The rapid heart rate can produce syncope (fainting); or, more important, AF may cause ventricular fibrillation and sudden cardiac death. The LifeVest the president wears terminates ventricular fibrillation or ventricular tachycardia (overspeed) to prevent sudden cardiac death. This may be the reason the president wore the device during the debates, even though he risked exposing his vulnerability, especially if the device alarm sounded."

President Bush's father had the same problem. Jogging at Camp David on a Saturday afternoon (May 4, 1991), Bush Sr developed shortness of breath, chest tightness, and a general feeling of fatigue. A White House physician discovered Bush had a rapid irregular heartbeat, ultimately diagnosed as atrial fibrillation caused by Graves' disease, a form of hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid).

Hyperthyroidism, hypertension, and other diseases can cause arrhythmias, as can recent heavy alcohol use. Some cases have no identifiable cause. The president says that he stopped drinking when he was 40 so, if he's to be believed, booze is not an issue.

The earliest photo of President Bush wearing the LifeVest, Hallmark says, was one taken in August 2002. He probably started wearing it between the January 2002 pretzel incident and this date. The most likely time would seem to be after his June 28, 2002 colonoscopy, for which he was put under anesthesia at Camp David, MD — that is, some time in July 2002.

At any rate, the president bears watching for symptoms of AF, which include: heart palpitations (sensation of rapid heartbeat), irregular pulse, shortness of breath (especially during physical activity or emotional stress), chest pain (angina), weakness and fatigue, dizziness lightheadness, or confusion. If the condition remains untreated, serious complications may occur, including stroke, heart attack, and heart failure.

Has Bush had a stroke? Hallmark says carefully, "The evidence of a stroke or TIA (transient ischemic attack) is less strong. It is symptomatic and based observation-at-a-distance – TV appearances and news reports – but it is there."

After watching the third presidential debate, Dr. Tongier, an anesthesiologist for 15 years, posted on the Dallas Morning News website a note about his concerns that the president may have had a stroke. His post said:

"Having watched the first two debates from start to finish, I was looking forward to listening to a spirited debate between Bush and Kerry. Unfortunately, I barely heard a word that was said. Instead, I found myself staring at and concentrating on the president's drooping mouth."

"As a physician and a professor, I tend to pick up on signs and symptoms of physical problems better than most other people. I am highly concerned with what I saw. The drooping left side of the President's face, his mouth and nasolabial fold (the crease in the face running from the nostril to the side of mouth) may be indicative of a recent stroke, TIA (transient ischemic attack) or, possibly botox injections. I sincerely hope this was nothing more than botox injections. The other options are truly scary given an upcoming election for president in three weeks.

"It certainly could be something as benign as an overzealous botox injection, which causes the paralysis, which is essentially how botox works. A lot of people will get them around the nasolabial fold to decrease those lines. If it's botox, it can be a short-term reaction after an injection. It could last for 24 hours and be gone. But I'd like to see the Bush campaign at least give an explanation."

There was no explanation and the president delayed his annual medical examination until after the election. "The President remains in superb physical condition," said Adam M. Robinson, Jr., commander of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD, after the president's fourth annual physical at the center on December 11. These days Bush bicycles most days and nearly brained himself last July after a tremendous toss off his custom $3000 Trek Fuel 98 mountain bike while careening down a trail at his Crawford, TX, spread.

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So here's the president strapped into his shock harness, liable to go down at any second. And if he's a health risk, what about Dick Cheney? Given the state of the veep's heart, he's probably hard-wired into a local generating station. They both go down and we have Hastert, the former wrestling coach who weighs in these days at 275 pounds.

Who says the universe isn't full of surprises? Ask the people on the shores of the Indian Ocean. We could lose Bush, Cheney, Hastert and Stevens all on the same day, and then Condi Rice will be running the show.

No Book of the Dead

"I wonder what happens", a CounterPuncher asked us recently, "to the millions of people who have been kicked off welfare." The same CounterPuncher then offered an answer.

"A couple of months ago a local Philadelphia television station reported on the case of a young mother from Delaware. She was on welfare and taking home study courses via the internet while caring for her infant daughter. The state informed her that the course work did not qualify under the welfare rules, and that she must get a job out of the home and place her daughter in state-approved day care. She followed their orders, got a job and placed her daughter in state approved day care. The first day, her daughter was killed in the day care because they did not keep her from sleeping on her stomach.

"Another victory for welfare reform. The death of the daughter will not be collected in any welfare reform-connected database, the mother will no longer qualify for welfare without a dependent, and the rolls will be reduced by two. How many people kicked off of welfare, especially those who are very old, ill, or mentally disabled, simply die? Is there a database for this, or does it fall in the statistics which report the U.S. at or near the bottom of industrialized nations in such things as life expectance, infant mortality, etc."

Of course there's no data base, at least not one labeled "Greater than expected deaths as a consequence of Bill Clinton's welfare reform", any more than there's a data base of all the victims the war on Iraq is creating on the home front, and which it will continue to create for years to come. The stats will be there to be collected, in terms of drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, mental and emotional disorders..

2005: We Have a Dream, Several Actually

In materials sent to CounterPunch the editors would prefer not to see:

• any remark attributed to Yogi Berra. No "déjà vu all over again". No Berra-isms and that's final.

• no "rough beast", particularly if it's slouching towards Bethlehem.

• While we're on the topic of W.B. Yeats we'd rather not be troubled by "a terrible beauty". Dump Yeats. Start quoting Pound and we'll perk up.

• Under no circumstances do we want to hear about the curious episode of the dog not barking in the night. Deep-six that dog, along with Holmes and Watson.

• Please, please give up any and every variant on "it's the economy, stupid."

• The same goes for, "it's, well, stupid"

• Or "it's, er, stupid".

• Or "stupid".

• Moving to punctuation we see far too many commas. Most of the time there's no need for them. Death to commas. Life to semi-colons.

So here's the president strapped into his shock harness, liable to go down at any second.

As for words, we don't care for

• syndrome

• use of the suffix "gate" to describe the scandal of the day

• "massive", a disease among leftists, particularly left economists, as in "massive unemployment", "massive deficit", "massive cuts" etc, etc.

• fascistic, as synonym for "annoying"

• Hitleresque

• hegemony or the even more irritating hegemon.

We like spirited prose, such as one rarely reads these days. Here's a letter from the late 1980s I ran across in the CounterPunch inbox the other day, a verray, parfit example of language vigorously and freshly deployed in a good cause.

The letter was sent by William Steinsmith MD, 239 Castenada Avenue, San Francisco to James S. Todd, MD, deputy executive vice president of the American Medical Association, 535 N. Dearborn, Chicago. The date, October 15, 1987.

"Dear Dr Todd,

"The New York Times for 13 October carried a lead article titled PLAN FOR MEDICARE FORCES U.S. TO LIST APPROVED DOCTORS, a scheme which would – in the oily huckster-lingo of its architect, Dr. William L. Roper – 'steer Medicare patients toward certain doctors who practice a conservative style of medicine, who have a proven track record of providing appropriate medical care without unnecessary utilization of service.'

"Noted also in this account was your own whining, banal, and defeatist rejoinder to this latest betrayal of the elderly ill by the Reaganite stooges of big finance-capital, to wit: 'It is totally inappropriate to force patients into a mode of health care they would not otherwise have chosen for themselves. We will be very unhappy if we perceive the Government using its market muscle power to coerce physicians or patients.'

"Though heavily occupied that evening with *salaried* attendance on a dozen acutely ill hospital patients – including a man in cardio-pulmonary arrest – my thoughts kept returning to this penultimate Government outrage against once-upright American clinical medicine, to the thousand-and-one maiming wounds previously inflicted by greasy politicians, swinish money changers, and shyster attorneys, and to the sniveling, cowardly, and treasonous professional collapse of yourself and your AMA ilk in the teeth of these cumulated insults and subversions. If American medicine had professional leaders worthy of the name, Dr Todd, is it conceivable that creatures like Roper and Bowen – besmirched with the filth and scandal of moribund Reaganism – could yet (underlined) be striding from crime to crime against the medicine of Osler and Halsted?

"So cynical has this careerist Roper waxed as to advertise himself as a 'card-carrying member of the American Medical Association.' If you and your AMA brethren retain a shred of professional honor, you will expel with fanfare and dispatch these odious quislings Roper and Bowen and call for their exemplary delicensure for high crimes of treachery against the profession. If you cannot rouse yourselves to this modicum of virtue at this late hour, Dr Todd, a thousand poxes on your fatuous, cowardly, and useless heads.

"Sincerely, William Steinsmith MD." CP

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People Will Cross the Border, No Matter How Hard It Gets; Besides, Uncle Sam Needs Them

By John Ross

Juarez

It has been a big year for the Migra – the U.S. Border Patrol in Mexican migrant patois – once the proud property of the Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization Services and now a star agency of the Homeland Security Department. Under Tom Ridge and his man on the border, ex-DEA czar Asa Hutchinson, the New Migra is now responsible for keeping the U.S.'s 3000 kilometer-long border free of terrorists and other darker-skinned troublemakers.

To carry out its new mission, the Migra has been endowed with a $1.2 billion budget and an arsenal of hardware: electronic sensors and high-definition video cameras emplaced all along the border with Mexico, fixed wing and light flight aircraft, attack helicopters, fleets of armored vehicles, dogs, pepper gas, and rubber bullets – the last three items designed to control the inrushing multitudes of undocumented workers. Another enhancement for the New Migra, whose 11,000 agents constitute a small army (the Migra is backed up by the real U.S. Army): sharp new military-style uniforms. In what must be one of NAFTA's defter ironies, much like the orange jumpsuits worn by "enemy combatants" in the U.S. Guantanamo torture camp, the Migra's new uniforms were made in Mexico by cheap Mexican labor.

Homeland Security accepted a low-bid $30 million contract to an El Paso outfit named V-Solutions which solved the problem by subcontracting the uniforms to a low-wage Chihuahua state maquiladora. Red-faced, Ridge and Company are now trying to figure out how many hot new Migra outfits are loose in Mexico. Such uniforms could probably command a premium price from Al Qaeda.

Vouchsafed enhanced powers by Homeland Security to "streamline" deportations, the Migra is now encouraged to arrest any undocumented workers captured within 100 miles of the border who have been in the U.S. for less than 14 days, and summarily drag them back across the line without legal intervention. Mexicans (and Canadians) are exempt from these round-ups and still can challenge their deportations in immigration courts or accept "voluntary departure".

The summary deportations are aimed at the largely Central American "indocumentados" who stream to the eastern end of the border where the McAllen Texas Migra sector traps two out of every three non-Mexican indocs stopped by the Border Patrol.

On the Pacific end of the border, Homeland Security unleashed its New Migra against Mexican migrants more than a hundred miles north of the California border this past June in a series of "redadas" or raids conducted by heavily armed posses of agents and apparently blessed by California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Prowling through Mexican enclaves all the way to San Bernardino and Riverside in southern California's Inland Empire, the Migra collared any brown face that could not show them a picture ID and deported more than a thousand back to Mexico. Two University of California-Northridge students, sisters who were born in Mexico and who went to Tijuana on a lark, were barred from re-entering the U.S. The family of a Mexican-born G.I. killed in combat in Iraq was deported during the crackdown.

The Migra collared any brown face that could not show them a picture ID and deported more than a thousand back to Mexico.

Some of the deportees are going home in cheap caskets supplied by Mexican consulates along the border. During the first ten days in June, ten undocumented workers were found dead here in Juarez. Six indocumentados perished in August out in the treacherous Arizona desert around Gila Bend where 192 migrants died in 2003 (nearly the number found dead in the first ten months of 2004.) Every year since NAFTA was signed back in 1992, 300 to 400 migrant workers have lost their lives on the border, drowning in rivers and irrigation canals or dying out in the desert, hit by fast-moving cars on California freeways, killed in high-speed Migra chases or under the guns of the Border Patrol.

Not unsurprisingly, many of the powers that Homeland Security has invested in the New Migra have been signed off on by the Mexican government of Vicente Fox, which is increasingly under fire from members of the opposition for acting like Washington's doormat. One example: the Migra is now armed with plastic bullets filled with pepper gas to quell civil disturbances. Use of these "non-lethal" weapons was originally proposed by the Mexican government to reduce Migra kills as a pilot project in the San Diego sector where a joint police-border patrol task force had shot dozens of migrants, and use is now general all along the border.

Although the Fox government promoted the project to save Mexican lives, the Migra has not laid down its more lethal weaponry and there have been three reported shootings this year, according to migrant worker rights defender Claudia Smith whose California Rural Legal Assistance Project keeps a running count.

Moreover, the plastic bullets are themselves potentially lethal. One such bullet fired by the Boston police killed a college student in October. Although regulations advise deployment only when an agent's life is deemed in danger, Smith says the weapons are routinely discharged against non-aggressive migrant workers. Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Relations Luis Ernesto Derbez concedes that there have been 234 such incidents since 2001.

If the New Migra can now summarily drag non-Mexicans back across the Mexican border, it is also flying Mexi-

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can deportees deep into the interior of their own country, a reprise on such shuttles thirty years ago. In yet another program backed up by the Fox government and designed to "save lives" by removing indocumentados from the border region, the New Migra, now outfitted with a fleet of commercial airliners, began flying Mexicans from Arizona. Homeland Security corralled more indocumentados in the Tucson sector in fiscal 2004 than any other border hot spot. But the unfortunate indocs were flown in a lateral rather than a southerly direction.

The so-called "lateral repatriation" project flew over 5,000 undocumented Mexicans who were kept in handcuffs and chains for up to 20 hours during transport from the Tucson sector further east to Laredo, Texas, where they were then pushed back across the bridge to Mexico. For some, the flight to Laredo was the first time they had ever been in an airplane. "It felt like I was inside the wheel of fortune," Abel Sanchez from Michoacan told reporters in Nuevo Laredo.

Although the project was hailed by both Washington and Fox as a humanitarian effort to move Mexicans out of harm's way in the accurately-named Arizona "corridor of death", "lateral repatriation" was not a big success. Dumping penniless migrants back across the line hardly solved the problem. Subsequent investigation determined that 28 per cent of those so deported were too broke to leave Nuevo Laredo and simply sought to cross the river the U.S. calls the Rio Grande and Mexico the Rio Bravo in that sector. Most of the rest drifted back to the Sonora desert for another try at Arizona.

Under a strategy advanced by Texas Democratic US rep Silvestre Reyes, once Migra chieftain in the El Paso sector whose "Hold The Line" crackdown in the early '90s spawned Operation Guardian in San Diego and Operation Rio Grande on the gulf, Mexican authorities began allowing "interior repatriation" flights this July to transport returnees from Arizona to Mexico City and Guadalajara. Several thousand accepted deportation before the program was abruptly suspended. From all accounts, Migra coercion of the indocumentados to board the flights was minimal; indeed, only 15% of those Mexican captured in the sector availed themselves of the free trip home.

But those who did accept the flights tell stories of trauma that explains why they have returned "voluntarily". One woman spoke of going crazy in the desert when she saw her eight year-old daughter dying of dehydration and threw herself upon the Migra to save both of them. Another man recounted how he was hunted down and almost killed by rival bands of "coyotes" (people smugglers). Still another had gone home to Michoacan to bury his mother and was stopped so many times trying to get back to his job in Phoenix that he had just given up.

Together the stories of the returnees rang with the sadness of Woody Guthrie's poignant ballad "Deportees", written about other planeloads of migrant workers captured during the Operation Wetback raids of the early 1950s.

Bad as it has become, 2004 could not have started out on a more upbeat note for the undocumented. In January, Bush unveiled his slick "earned citizenship" immigration reform package, an election year gambit to put a Republican dent in the nominally Democratic Latino vote. The proposed reform revived hope of an immigration agreement that slipped out of Mexico's hands after the 9/11 terror attacks on the U.S and was heartily endorsed by the ingenuous Fox.

Upon second glance, the "earned citizenship" requirements proved to be little more than five years of indentured servitude to one employer before eligibility for legalization was achieved. Although the guest worker proposal will be introduced in the next session of congress, any immigration legislation will face a rough passage. The overwhelming victory of an Arizona ballot proposition barring the undocumented from using basic public services (schools, hospitals) is a litmus test of the anti-immigration mood of the electorate.

But if Homeland Security's Migra attack plan has not done enough to discourage the indocumentados, the T-Men are now threatening to go after their "remisas", the stupendous flood of U.S. greenback dollar bills Mexicans send back home, estimated at $13.5 billion last year and predicted to hit $14 billion in 2004.

Although Mexicans working in the U.S. pay plenty of taxes to Tio Sam – income taxes, withholding taxes, property taxes, sales taxes – now, there have been efforts to push through some western legislatures, such as Arizona's, laws extorting a tax on the money they send back to Mexico.

Remisas are in fact Mexico's anti-poverty program in a nation where 70 per cent of the population lives near the poverty line. It's the only money that actually ever gets distributed down on the ground in rural Mexico. One in five Mexican families are now dependent on the remisa for survival and a day without remisas would be like a day without Mexicans at Western Union or Moneygram and other high-volume money movers. The huge cashflow south now bankrolls entire regions and is second only to high-flying export petroleum in bringing Yanqui dollars to Mexico.

Although the Arizona resolution was immediately condemned by President Fox and all of the political parties, dissed by Mexico's Cardinals, and deplored at a Lima Peru meeting of the InterAmerican Development Bank (other countries dependent on remisas – El Salvador, Honduras, and Ecuador - would also be affected), the idea of putting a surcharge on the billions migrant workers earn for performing labor that U.S. citizens disdain, is a concept whose time has clearly come, particularly in bankrupt states with large Mexican populations, such as the one presently governed by Terminator Schwarzenegger. CP

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(**Iraq** *continued from page 2)*

Iraqi. Every few days the tortured bodies of victims whose families could not raise the ransom money are found with their eyes gouged out or their heads cut off floating in the irrigation canals or in the Tigris.

Few Iraqis believe that the elections are going to reduce the violence. At best they are the start of a lumbering process by which the three main Iraqi communities – the Shia Arabs, the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds – will negotiate their future relations within one state. There is more than a single election involved. The vote on January 30 will be for a 275 member transitional National Assembly. This will choose a President and two deputy- presidents from among their own members. This so-called presidential council will in turn appoint a prime minister and other ministers. The National Assembly will then draft a constitution to be voted on in a referendum by October 15, 2005. If passed there will then be a further election for a permanent government in December 2005. If it fails to pass we start all over again with an election for a new National Assembly.

All this would be difficult enough to do in Denmark or Austria but this complicated process is supposed to happen in a country which is in a state of war in 15 of its 18 provinces (the only safe ones are the three Kurdish provinces). Ethnic and sectarian divisions are far deeper than a year ago. When suicide bombers killed at least 66 people in the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala on December 19 the Shia leaders pleaded with their own people not seek revenge — though this may be only postponed until after the election.

The growing split between Sunni and Shia became obvious when the US Marines stormed Fallujah in November Only six months earlier the Marines had to back off when their assault on this militantly Sunni city provoked a nationalist reaction. Shia and Sunni in Baghdad both protested vociferously against the attack. At the blood bank I watched Shia technicians from the Oil Ministry line up to give blood for the Fallujans alongside Sunni farmers who had arrived from their villages on rickety old buses.

Everything was very different the second time round. By November it was difficult to find a Shia in Baghdad who did not think that the Fallujans were getting exactly what was coming to them. Over the summer suicide bombers believed to have come from Fallujah had slaughtered hundreds of Shia young men desperate for jobs as they waited outside police stations and army barracks. The Shia had come to see Fallujah as a stronghold of Salafi or Wahabi, Sunni fundamentalists, for whom it is no sin to kill Shia as heretics and infidels.

The conventional explanation of the importance of the election is that it will allow the Shia, 15-16 million out of the 25 million Iraqi population, to achieve power. The argument goes that they will finally be able to dominate government after being politically marginalized for centuries.

It will not be as easy as that. Power in Iraq today depends on military strength. The five million Sunni Arabs in Iraq are not going to end their rebellion because the Shia have a majority in the National Assembly. The four million Kurds, the best organized Iraqi community and the big gainers from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, will not surrender their quasi- independence in northern Iraq or their control of Kirkuk.

The election is crystalizing the differences between Shia and Sunni. The Sunni are fighting the US occupation while the Shia are not. The Shia will take part in the election and the Sunni will largely boycott it. They are still some way from a civil war but they are becoming more polarized by the month. Preachers in Shia and Sunni mosques are for the first time openly denouncing each other. The war will go on after January 30 with the US losing two to three soldiers killed a day. Iraqis watched open mouthed as Tony Blair in his surprise visit on December 21 portrayed what was happening as a straight fight between "terrorism and democracy". The main motor for the resistance is opposition to the US and British occupation. There is no reason why it should stop because of the election.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential Shia leader, has cobbled together an unwieldy slate of Shia political parties and dignitaries who have nothing in common except a need for his support. He has argued since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein that the Shia should not make the mistake they made in rebelling against British rule in 1920. This led the British to base their rule on the Sunnis. The election will let the three communities in Iraq assess their strength but will decide nothing else. The US can stand up to the uprising so long as it is confined to the Sunni, though they do not have the strength to crush it. But the moment the Shia turn against them their army will have to leave Iraq. CP

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